

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 662

THE NATION
30 MAY 1981

ONWARD WYCLIFFE SOLDIERS

Missionaries With a Mission?

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On March 7, guerrillas from Colombia's revolutionary April 19 Movement executed Chester A. Bitterman 3d, a 28-year-old American missionary they had kidnapped two months earlier. They justified their action by claiming that the U.S.-based organization Bitterman worked for, Wycliffe Bible Translators, was a front for the Central Intelligence Agency. Bitterman's employer, a widely known religious and educational organization with close ties to several colleges and universities, as well as a legion of endorsers among business, governmental and diplomatic circles, denied April 19's claims, and most people quickly dismissed the guerrillas' allegations as irrational ravings from the perpetually paranoid underground of Latin American politics.

But April 19 is not the first organization to charge that Wycliffe Bible Translators has links with the U.S. intelligence community. Nor does all the criticism emanate from the far left. A steadily increasing number of academics, including numerous Latin American anthropologists, have accused Wycliffe of providing cover for covert C.I.A. operations and of engaging in intelligence gathering. A variety of South American magazines and newspapers have criticized Wycliffe and its subsidiaries, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (J.A.A.R.S.), for working closely with some of the most repressive governments in Latin America, and for promoting the exploitation of Latin resources by multinational corporations. Even some churchmen have attacked Wycliffe for using the pretext of its Christian mission to promote Western notions of politics, law and social organizations, thus helping to destroy indigenous cultures among isolated peoples.

Wycliffe was founded by William Cameron Townsend, a Bible salesman from Orange County, California, who, as a young man during World War I, worked among the primitive tribes in Central America. According to *Uncle Cam*, an "authorized" biography of Townsend written by James and Marti Hefley in 1974 and printed by The Word Books, a religious publishing house, the young Bible trader quickly realized that the Spanish-language religious

literature he was peddling might as well have been written in Swedish since most of the non-Christian Indians he approached could communicate only in obscure native tongues which seemed to have no alphabet or established rules of usage. Townsend mounted a series of linguistic expeditions into remote parts of the Central American and Mexican jungles, studying several of these little-known languages and developing grammars for them. In 1934, Townsend and a group of his colleagues established a language program for would-be Bible translators at Sulphur Springs, Arkansas—the first Summer Institute of Linguistics. In 1935, the institute's first graduating class began working among preliterate tribes in Mexico, and Wycliffe Bible Translators was born.

Today, the organization has at least 3,000 career linguists and other professionals working in more than twenty-five countries. According to a recent pamphlet from Wycliffe, the group's legions of Christian soldiers have worked among obscure tribes of preliterate peoples in Asia, Africa, North and South America, the Philippines, New Guinea and Europe. Several years ago, the organization even sent a delegation to the Soviet Union to study some of the lesser-known national languages within the U.S.S.R.

Wycliffe's primary activity is translating the New Testament and other biblical texts into the languages of aboriginal societies, which the larger and better-known Christian missionary organizations consider too small to bother with. In the course of that work, Wycliffe has developed a missionary relationship with more than 555 tribes all over the world, and has translated religious works into more than 200 languages.

But Wycliffe is much more than a missionary organization. It is supported by outside funding totaling roughly \$8 million a year. Much of the money is paid by the governments of the countries in which it operates. The remainder comes from U.S. governmental agencies like the Alliance for Industrial Development and the former Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and from wealthy fundamentalist businessmen and small church organizations. In 1947, Wycliffe organized its own airline of bush pilots and mechanics to support Wycliffe missionaries probing the

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